

Presidential Address

Delivered by Sir Tony Wrigley PBA to the 98th Annual General Meeting of the Academy, on 6 July 2000.



The successive addresses delivered to the Annual General Meeting each year by the President form an episodic running commentary on the affairs of the Academy. It is to be expected, therefore, that some of the topics to which reference is made in any one year will recur when the next address is delivered. Last year I spoke at some length about the then newly formed Arts and Humanities Research Board and ALSISS, the Association of Learned Societies in the Social Sciences. It is convenient to begin this year's address by referring to more recent developments in these two bodies.

Arts and Humanities Research Board

The AHRB has continued to make notable progress during the past year. Its existence has transformed the resources available to support research in the arts and humanities and has already gone far towards transforming the thinking of scholars in the humanities about the kinds of research projects which it is possible to undertake since the scale of individual research grants is now often comparable to those in the social sciences. As its confidence has risen, it has become increasingly irksome to the Board and to the Chief Executive that its present institutional form is so obviously a temporary expedient deriving from the unwillingness on the part of the government to pronounce on the recommendations of the Dearing report. The AHRB therefore intends to convert itself into a company limited by guarantee with effect from 1 April 2001. This will, among other benefits, enable the AHRB to write its own cheques and to issue employment contracts to its staff rather than having the Academy and HEFCE act as its agents for these purposes. In the year next following this transformation, it is probable that all staff will be relocated at a single site outside London. In consequence the substantial amount of office space within this building which is currently occupied by AHRB staff will become vacant, creating at once both difficulty and opportunity for the Academy. Relations between the Academy and the AHRB have continued to develop amicably and are gradually becoming institutionalised. The first meeting of a liaison committee of the two bodies designed to facilitate the exchange of information and to discuss matters of mutual interest will take place later this month.

Professor Paul Langford FBA has been both the Chairman and the Chief Executive of the AHRB since its inception. His term in both offices ends at the end of September this year on his becoming Rector of Lincoln College. His holding of both offices simultaneously was never intended to set a precedent and the two posts were separately advertised earlier this year. He will retire from office in the knowledge that his inspiring and decisive leadership has brought into being an institution which has

transformed the prospects for research in the humanities in a manner which has no previous analogue. To do this was an ambition of the Academy throughout the 1990s. It is most gratifying to see this ambition fulfilled. The gradual evolution of the AHRB towards the equivalent of full research council status is both to be expected and to be welcomed. The public profile of the Academy is also clarified by these recent developments, since the gradual conversion of the AHRB into a body increasingly similar in its functions to the ESRC, and entirely divorced from the Academy, helps to substantiate the claim that the Academy's resources are equally and indifferently available both to the humanities and to the social sciences and that it is fulfilling its role of standing in relation to the humanities and the social sciences as the Royal Society does in relation to the physical and biological sciences.

The two posts of Chairman and Chief Executive of the AHRB have now both been filled. Sir Brian Follett, shortly to retire as Vice-Chancellor of the University of Warwick, takes over from Paul Langford as Chairman. His name will be familiar to many Fellows since he was chairman of the British Academy-ESRC working party on the future of funding research in the humanities in the early 1990s and because of his expertise in relation to library provision (he was chairman of the Joint Funding Councils' Libraries Review Group which in 1993 produced the Follett Report). David Eastwood who is to become the new Chief Executive is a Pro-Vice-Chancellor of the University of Wales, Swansea, where he holds a chair of Modern History, having formerly been a Fellow and Senior Tutor of Pembroke College, Oxford.

ALSISS

ALSISS completed its metamorphosis from an association into an academy of learned societies in the social sciences in November of 1999. It began life with 66 founder Fellows, of whom only four are also FBAs. When discussing its prospective formation last year, I remarked that it was unclear whether the two bodies were capable of developing in a complementary manner or not. This remains unclear. There has been a meeting of the small liaison group which was set up jointly to exchange information and views, but the meeting did little to clarify this or other related issues. To date the most striking initiative of ALSISS has been the announcement of its intention to set up a commission with a very broad remit to review the future of the social sciences in Britain, under the chairmanship of Professor David Rhind. This is to be done in furtherance of ALSISS's intention of exploiting the resources of the social sciences with the aim of 'understanding today and shaping tomorrow'. Professor Rhind

was courteous in seeking an early meeting with me to brief me about his hopes and plans for the commission. The commission is expected to take evidence from many sources. Its ambitious scope implies that it will not report until towards the end of next year at the earliest.

Graduate Studies

Though some subjects remain matters of interest or concern over an extended period, each year brings forth new issues. To some of these I now turn. It is a truism that the future health of the humanities and social sciences in this country depends in large measure on the quality of each successive generation of graduate students embarking on research. Many Fellows have in recent months expressed alarm about the evidence that both in relation to the quantity and to the quality of new entrants the current situation is unsatisfactory and the prospective situation in a few years' time deeply alarming. There is much evidence both statistical and anecdotal to support this view. This issue was a particular concern of the late Colin Matthew who conveyed his alarm forcefully to Council, and it has been widely echoed by Sections, Committees, and individuals in the ensuing months. Undergraduates are completing their studies with a heavy and increasing load of debt. Many are, understandably, reluctant to add to their burdens by embarking on three to five years of graduate work which will leave them still more heavily indebted without necessarily greatly enhancing their career prospects. In such circumstances, it requires an unusual degree of dedication to tip the balance of argument in favour of beginning graduate study. The situation has been made additionally uncertain by the initiative taken recently by the EPSRC under which, rather than allotting a quota of studentships to a given department, the EPSRC will in future make available an equivalent sum, leaving it to the discretion of the department how greatly to increase the level of the individual maintenance grant. This is likely both to mean substantial variation in the level of the grant from one university to the next, and, at least in some universities, to a substantial reduction in the number of studentships. Since alarm at the extremely low level of maintenance grants is widespread, it is more than likely that the other Research Councils, including the ESRC, will follow the lead of the EPSRC, and that this in turn will make necessary difficult decisions by the AHRB. The fact that studentships are awarded *ad personam* by the AHRB rather than being given to departments adds a further dimension of difficulty.

Council has responded to this challenge by creating a committee under the chairmanship of Professor Bob Bennett to probe as wide a range of issues related to graduate study in the humanities and social sciences as proves necessary in order to produce an authoritative report. The committee, which has already held a first meeting, expects to assemble a substantial volume of statistical data with a bearing on these issues as well as undertaking widespread consultation. It cannot therefore hope to produce its report before the middle of next year. When it appears, however, the report is likely to prove of great importance

not only substantively but as exemplifying a new phase in the engagement of the Academy in public debate about issues on which the Academy is well placed to make an authoritative contribution to discussion.

Policy Studies

There has been an exceptional level of support in the Sections for the establishment in the Academy of a policy unit charged with producing a flow of reports comparable to those which the Royal Society produces. The Academy has not, of course, been entirely idle in the past in this regard. The excellent and informative report on *British Academy Support for Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences* is a good example of our ability to produce informed analysis, and, jointly with the Royal Society of Edinburgh, we shall before long publish a report on the implications of devolution for the humanities and social sciences in Scotland. The Academy has also responded in the past year to requests for authoritative comment on quite a wide range of issue, as for example on the proposed new European copyright law, on the illicit trade in cultural property, on aerial archaeology, and on the contentious environmental, scientific, and human issues surrounding the construction of the Ilisu dam in Turkey. It is agreed, however, that it is important that the Academy should become more proactive and consistent in these matters than in the past, and that a facility should be created within the Academy to provide the administrative and research support without which it is not possible to produce reports of real weight. More thought also needs to be given to such matters as devising a standard format for statements and reports and ensuring that each is produced at a length and in a form appropriate to the audience which it is intended to reach. Developing a capacity of this kind means finding additional resources, but there can be no doubt either that the effort will be worthwhile or that it enjoys widespread support among the Fellowship.

Fundraising

Mention of finding new resources, incidentally, leads me to refer to an issue which is likely to loom large in the next few years. On reasonable assumptions about the future course of funding, the prospects beyond next year look bleak. The clouds may yet lift, but the probability is that Council will be obliged to take decisions which will involve a reduction in real terms of the resources available to some areas of Academy activity. This prospect increases the importance of seeking ways of improving our financial position, ideally by securing a major increase in the endowment of the Academy. Only a little over 2 per cent of our income in the year to 31 March 2000 came from the private funds and much of that arose from trust funds whose use is circumscribed by the terms of the gift or bequest in question. At present the only substantial sum of general endowment at the disposal of the Academy is represented by the Academy Development Fund, which currently stands at about £1.7m. The income flow, or indeed the total return, on such a sum is trivial in relation to the needs of the Academy. The exigency of our

need, unfortunately, has little bearing on our chance of success in improving the situation, but I am encouraged by the fact that several Fellows have shown that they are conscious that this is a matter of the greatest importance to the future of the Academy. I am sure that every effort must be made to attract donations and benefactions and hope that clear progress can be made in the course of the next year, beginning by examining with care a range of possible strategies for fundraising.

External Relations

Enthusiasm for the establishment of a policy unit is one aspect of a sea change which is taking place in the way the Academy views its aims and also, perhaps, in the way in which others perceive us. Since the last AGM the Academy has appointed an officer, Jonathan Breckon, to oversee and improve our external relations, while at the same time the setting up of our still relatively new Public Understanding and Activities Committee, now under the chairmanship of Professor John Morrill, symbolises the importance which the Academy has come to attach to what is now generally termed 'outreach'. As with the policy unit initiative, the new emphasis does not imply that the Academy had previously been inactive in this regard, but experience shows conclusively that to raise the profile of any institution or activity it is necessary to take positive steps to make its aims and objectives understood, rather than relying upon others to find out for themselves. We are in the early stages only of this initiative but it carries high promise for the Academy. In this connection I should like to draw attention to the publication of the first two issues of the *British Academy Review*. This is to appear twice a year. The first issue demonstrated very effectively the range of our activities in supporting research projects, in providing research posts at all levels, in maintaining a remarkably complex web of relationships with academies and other institutions abroad, in facilitating conferences and symposia, in sponsoring lectures, in awarding prizes, in publication, and in underwriting the schools and institutes abroad. The second issue provided further ample illustration of the same points.

Web site

I should mention one further aspect of our outreach plans. Last year I referred to an ambition to develop the web site of the Academy in a way which would make it a port of first call for scholars for a very wide range of purposes. We have progressed less rapidly in furthering this ambition than I had hoped twelve months ago, but the lengthy consultations which have taken place should help to ensure that the final result fulfils the hopes earlier expressed. An appropriate brief for a consultant has now been drawn up and I anticipate that his report will be available before the end of the year. Depending on his recommendations, appointments will then be made both to cover design needs and to secure appropriate information flows. The importance of the world wide web as a means of communication and a source of information becomes more evident almost daily and the pressure of competition is equally clear. The increasing degree of

dependence upon web facilities within the Academy itself is notable. The Academy cannot afford to fail in this regard.

Centenary

Our centenary approaches fast. Many of the Academy's committees have been active for many months in preparing for it. There is a sense, indeed, in which the centenary has already begun since the first volumes resulting from Section initiatives in relation to the centenary have already appeared. No doubt the centenary will also spread beyond the year 2002 itself, but since so much will be concentrated in the centenary year itself, Council has recently appointed a very small committee to co-ordinate the many different initiatives which are in train and Council will expect to receive reports at regular intervals in the course of the new session to monitor progress. It is a pleasure, incidentally, to record our warm thanks to the Leverhulme Trust for their generosity in establishing a Centenary Prize in recognition of the approaching milestone in our history. On the occasion of its first award in 2002, two prizes will be given, in recognition of attaining the highest distinction in the humanities and social sciences respectively.

With an eye to the centenary, I intend to write shortly to every Fellow, asking for a complete list of his or her publications. I have in mind the value of compiling an intellectual inventory of the Fellowship. Publications in book form are not difficult to track down, but publications in article form or in the form of chapters in joint works present far more difficulty to anyone other than the author. I hope it might prove possible to secure funding to enable the publications of deceased Fellows to be covered similarly. Assuming such an inventory could be assembled, I believe it would be widely consulted. It would be made available, of course, on the Academy web site and could be constantly updated. As well as being a service to scholarship, it would also be an act of piety appropriate to the centenary. Eventually, if it proves possible to staff the library adequately, it may also be possible to secure copies of all publications of Fellows in whatever form to form the core of the library holdings. We have already, of course, made a start. Many Fellows have responded generously to my earlier appeal to donate copies of their books to the library. I trust that those who may have overlooked the matter to date will also respond.

Premises

It is timely, I think, now that we are well settled, to lay stress on the advantages to the Academy which have followed from our move to 10 Carlton House Terrace. We have far more space than previously, without which the expansion in the range of our activities would have been impossible. The main public rooms are handsome. Their walls, which were all bare at this time last year, are now hung with paintings in keeping with their character so that the building no longer looks as if we had only just moved in. Foreign delegations are frequently much impressed with what they see: our present accommodation greatly enhances our image. We lack a single room large enough to accommodate the

numbers who would like to attend some of our more popular meetings but otherwise we have every reason to be thankful for the decision to move. In future it may come to be regarded as a decisive moment in our history and an appropriate precursor to the celebration of our centenary.

Staff

Each year I make reference to my sense of personal obligation to the members of the staff of the Academy. I am certain that my feelings are mirrored very widely throughout the Fellowship. It is difficult to avoid being repetitious on this point, and I shall not attempt a full rehearsal of our collective debt to them on this occasion. I should like to stress, however, that brevity should not be confused with a lack of warmth. Their support is not only

necessary to the smooth administrative functioning of the Academy but every Fellow who has served on an Academy committee will be aware how much is owed to the assistant secretaries who serve the committees in so many different ways, in preparing material patiently and expertly, in providing excellent advice on points of difficulty, and not least in deftly steering committees away from pitfalls which might otherwise entrap them.

The new millennium has now begun (at least by the conventional reckoning). We shall have many occasions during our centenary year to reflect on the history of the Academy. Now may be a particularly apposite moment to focus on our future, and especially on the new opportunities available to us.